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# Coolie chains: global commodities, colonialism and the question of labour

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## Abstract

*The analysis of global commodity chains calls for a close attention to the question of labour – in colonial times as well as in the present. Since the economy of the French domains in Indochina and New Caledonia relied on labour-intensive resource extraction (rubber, minerals), the colonial administration and French enterprises envisaged a system of coolie labour that implied the transfer of thousands of Vietnamese labourers from densely populated Tonkin to the newly established plantations and mines. The emergence of global commodity chains linked to European industrialization in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century thus entailed considerable social transformations in the colonies as a result of changing labour regimes.*

## Zusammenfassung

Die Analyse globaler Warenketten in der Kolonialära muss den Faktor Arbeit berücksichtigen. Da die Wirtschaft in den französischen Kolonien Indochinas und Neu-Kaledoniens auf der arbeitsintensiven Ausbeutung von natürlichen Ressourcen (Kautschuk, Minerale) basierte, entwickelte die Kolonialverwaltung zusammen mit französischen Unternehmen ein System von Kuli-Arbeit, welches den massiven Transfer von vietnamesischen Arbeitern aus dicht bevölkerten Regionen hin zu den Plantagen und Minen vorsah. Globale Warenketten – ausgehend von der Europäischen Industrialisierung im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert – zogen somit neue Arbeitsbeziehungen und erhebliche soziale Transformationen in den Kolonien nach sich.

**Keywords** Global commodity chains, colonialism, labour, coolies, French Indochina

Coolie labour provides a lens through which to view present-day patterns of unfree labour with regard to the emergence or shifts of global commodity chains. As *van der Linden* (2001: 449ff.) points out, labour was always part of the equation as a commodity in relations of slavery, sharecropping and debt peonage, as well as in free wage labour. While these systems co-existed under colonialism (and before), European industrialization substantially depended on the exploitation of overseas unfree labour: slaves and coolies

(*Zeuske* 2013). The global economy in colonial times implied shifting patterns of labour relations linked to emerging global commodity chains. Hence, the analysis of present-day global value chains and corresponding labour regimes in the Global South benefits from the adoption of a historical perspective.

This is particularly true when it comes to the exploitation of cheap, unskilled migrant labour in past and present under conditions of coercion and vulnerability.

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The *longue durée* of unfree labour includes forms of slavery, indentured labour, bonded servitude and contemporary cases of so-called ‘modern slavery’, for example Asian contract labourers in the Arab Gulf States. As today, different modes of forced labour were compatible with free wage labour and subsistence production in the past. Today and in the past, capitalism – contrary to how Marx would have it – does in fact include variants of unfree labour (Lucassen 2008; Brass 2014). The exploitation of labour has always taken advantage of global inequalities and corresponding migration patterns.

The global coolie trade, mainly Chinese and Indian labourers sent to the vast plantations in the New World, brought about a new dimension of global labour migration during the 19<sup>th</sup> century – when slavery was gradually abolished by the colonial powers and came to be considered morally corrupt (Northrup 1995; Look Lai 2003). Before colonialism, the term coolie was largely reserved for casual day-labourers in Asian port cities, which formed key nodes of early global trade networks (Masashi 2009; Manning 2004). European indentured labour was, structurally, the precedent of the colonial coolie system, with migrants working under contracts, mainly in agricultural production. However, Asian coolies – contracted under penal sanctions – faced more constraints, such as everyday violence and racism, forced immobilization in the workplace and other elements of unfreedom (Bahadur 2014).

With a colonial economy based on labour-intensive resource extraction (rubber, minerals), the French domains in Southeast Asia and the Pacific faced “the problem of labour” (Pasquier 1918): How to fulfil the immense demand of labour without resorting to slavery (abolished in France since 1848)? The French found a solution in recruiting Vietnamese labourers from densely populated Tonkin (North Vietnam) to work as ‘coolies’ under 3- or 4-year contracts in southern Indochina (rubber plantations) and New Caledonia (nickel mines). Rubber and nickel became important commodities for European industrialization, and constituted important commodity chains within the intensifying global economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These commodity chains linked “raw materials, labour, the sustenance of labour, intermediate processing, final processing, transport, and final consumption”, thus materially connecting “most of the people within the contemporary world-system” (Chase-Dunn 1991: 346). The colonial plantation economy particularly emblemized this complex after its intensifi-

cation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when both production and consumption patterns in industrialized societies demanded larger quantities. In the case of rubber the successful import of *hévéa brasiliensis* from South America in 1876 marked the start of large-scale production of rubber in Southeast Asia for the world market (Panthou and Tran 2013).

Rubber was one key commodity of the colonial plantation economy (along with sugar, coffee, tobacco, cotton etc.), important for the growing automotive industry and used in textile manufacturing (Tully 2011). During the rubber boom in the interwar years, the cultivated acreage jumped to an estimated 80,000 ha (Brocheux and Hémerly 2009: 127). Vietnamese coolies from densely populated Tonkin (in particular the Red River Delta) were recruited to work on the plantations on the high plateaus of southern Indochina. These regions were only sparsely populated by various ethnic groups whom the colonists considered an insufficient workforce. In addition, the transfer of Vietnamese coolies from Tonkin to the south would mean a solution to overpopulation, land scarcity and poverty – in fact aggravated by colonial land reforms – while constituting a stable supply of cheap labour for the French plantation entrepreneurs (ibid.).

Vietnamese coolies were also shipped to the remote islands of New Caledonia where from the 1870s the French started to explore the vast nickel reserves. Nickel became the most important commodity of this French domain in the South Pacific, and still today New Caledonia supplies one quarter to one third of the global production of this metal. Resisting corrosion, nickel became an essential alloying material for the Western steel industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (McNeil 1990). Mining companies in New Caledonia took advantage of the established colonial infrastructures of coolie recruitment in Indochina to employ an annual 2,000 coolies for the nickel mines – not least because of the resistance by and high mortality rate of the indigenous population, and also due to racial considerations (Angleviel 2001).

In both cases, the emerging commodity chains under intensified industrialization in Europe and the US entailed radical economic, demographic and sociocultural transformations at the sites of labour-intensive production in the Global South. Vietnamese coolies in southern Indochina and New Caledonia were confronted with everyday racism and violence at the hands of French overseers in spite of alleged legal ‘protection’.

The period of the coolie contract in fact meant a temporary suspension of basic human rights, a kind of 'semi-slavery' aggravated by precarious living conditions and the risk of indebtedness (due to a combination of advances and retainers, and insufficient nutrition and arbitrary fines for 'insubordination' – if not severe corporal punishments) (see *Klein* 2012).

There are indeed many parallels to present-day precarious conditions of labour migrants in the Global South (see *Bush* 2000). Like colonial coolies, Bengali contract workers in the Gulf States and Burmese migrants in the Thai shrimp industry suffer from poor living conditions, indebtedness, legal constraints and immobilization at the workplace. As the treatment of colonial coolies reflected the "limits of liberalism" (*Young* 2015) under colonialism, global market capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to bring forward new forms of unfree labour. With poverty being one of the main drivers for migration, the question of 'voluntary' labour migration becomes an issue as well. Global economic inequalities and vulnerabilities have to be taken into account when analyzing the interplay of commodity chains and labour relations.

Commodity chains as sequences of value-adding steps imply imbalanced power relations, or rather exploitative labour relations, especially in the initial chains of labour-intensive production (see *Bair* 2008). Political decision-making and legal frameworks "influence the organisation of the chain (...) by establishing an institutional frame and by using policy instruments" (*Kulke* 2007: 120) – in the context of contract/coolie labour both past and present, in order to recruit, control and discipline a cheap, circulating disposable workforce constituted by labourers from poor regions. Operating in a grey zone between unfree and free wage labour, the coolie system built upon mechanisms of coerced labour for the benefit of labour-intensive industrialization in the Global North (see *Austin* and *Sugihara* 2013). Analyzing colonial coolie labour yields insights also pertinent to labour relations under conditions of global capitalism today – in the context of increasing inequalities and vulnerabilities within the societies of the Global South.

Combining labour history with a commodity-chains approach helps to explain the shifting patterns of free and unfree labour in global capitalism – including recent tendencies within the Global South. Considering the different links and nodes of global commodity chains will enable us to identify forms of coerced

labour in modern capitalism. Coolies are still found nowadays in the form of exploited labourers in textile factories, on shrimp trawlers, and on construction sites related to Western consumption and investment interests. Thus, this approach connects production and consumption patterns in the Global North with corresponding dynamics along the initial chain links within the Global South, while illuminating the underlying labour regimes and power asymmetries.

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